

The University of Chicago

ECONOMIC FACTORS IN THE DECIAN- VALERIAN PERSECUTIONS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH HISTORY
1931

BY
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WHY DID DECIUS AND VALERIAN PRO- SCRIBE CHRISTIANITY?

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Severe economic depression had the Roman world in its grip during the middle of the third century A. D.; a condition from which the Mediterranean countries never fully recovered. There is much evidence to show that the economic structure of the Empire was crumbling.¹ Very soon the outlying territories of the Empire were overrun by barbarians,² trade collapsed, and brigandage and piracy reappeared on a large scale. All of this was accompanied by a rapid rise in the prices of the commodities of life.³ To-day we look for the causes of economic depressions in intricate and far-reaching social forces. In the third century Romans of the old school had a much more simple and direct explanation. When the Empire fell on hard times and disaster stalked the corners there was only one cause: the gods who had given Rome her power and the Empire its prosperity in the years gone by were being neglected, foreign gods and oriental cults had usurped the religious fervor of the people, and the venerable gods of the Eternal City were angered. The remedy was likewise simple: revive and stimulate the worship of the ancient gods of Rome, thus appeasing their anger, and prosperity would return.

In the fall of the year 249 A. D. Caius Messius Decius, a Roman of the old school, became head of the Roman Empire. His

¹ M. Rostovtzeff: *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1926, Chap. IX, X.

² E. Gibbon: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Chandos Classics, London, 1894, Vol. I, pp. 191-208.

³ F. F. Abbott: *The Common People of Ancient Rome*, New York, 1917, pp. 145-178.

was not an enviable task. A strong army was needed on many fronts, but how were the soldiers to be paid? Decius does not seem to have been one who acted hastily. He probably realized that if the imperial treasuries were low it would bring no permanent relief to increase taxation. Much more fundamental measures were called for. The basic reason for the precarious situation was obvious: the traditional gods of Rome were angered. Philip, the predecessor of Decius, had been a syncretistic orientalist in matters of religion; no wonder, then, that the Empire was headed for the rocks. The surest way to restore permanent prosperity, according to such a Roman as Decius,⁴ would be to revive the worship of the Roman religion throughout the Empire, and the favor of the gods would assure the future. The consequence was that Decius, probably early in January of the year 250 A. D., issued an edict to the effect that all Roman temples should be reopened and all citizens of the Empire should show their allegiance to the gods of Rome by worshipping at these shrines. There is indication, also, that there was a general religious revival at this time.⁵ Thus the measure adopted by Decius was a religious action in its conception and execution. However, this step was not motivated by any personal, pious, religious devotion on the part of Decius, but by the threatening economic ruin of the Empire. The primary and fundamental cause of the imperial action taken by Decius was economic. It does not matter in the least whether he was fully conscious of that fact or not. Decius saw that unless forces could be assembled that would enable him to combat effectively the threatening dissolution, within and without, the Empire would collapse.

It is also important to note that this edict was not specifically directed against any special sect or group in the Empire. All citizens were called upon to declare their allegiance; it was a test of patriotism as well as of religious fervor. It happened, however, that the Christians and the Jews were the only significant groups in the Roman world who could not conscientiously obey this command to worship at the Roman shrines. The Jews had long ago established their right to religious independence and the fact that they refused to obey the edict did not get them into any difficulty. Not so with the Christians. They were still in the position of a *collegium illicitum* in the eyes of the Roman government. Their refusal to conform to the edict was an act of treason. Conse-

⁴ See Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, LII. 36 for a brief exposition of this point of view.

⁵ A. D. Nock, *A diis electa*, Harvard Theol. Rev. 23:251-254.

quently, the reform action which Decius undertook meant persecution with reference to the Christians.

It is very significant that the first imperial persecution of the Christians on a general scale was instigated at the time when the Roman Empire was tottering on the brink of complete economic disaster. It would be apparent to any wide-awake citizen that immediate and drastic action was imperative. The Roman government was always anxious to maintain peace and order in the Empire and any movement or organization that threatened disorder in the body politic was ruthlessly suppressed. However, prior to the year 250, the Roman government had not endeavored to destroy Christianity. Only when popular hostility to the Christians caused public disturbances, or raised a hue and cry, did the government take a hand. This was true even in the case of Septimius Severus, who was struck by the existing conditions which he observed on a tour through the east. From the point of view of the imperial government the Christians must have been, on the whole, very desirable citizens. They were quiet, industrious, prosperous and paid their taxes.⁶ No emperor in his right mind would undertake their extermination or feel called upon to destroy their organization, which fostered such desirable citizens, without great provocation. This provocation did not arise until the economic crisis of the times of Decius and Valerian, at the same time when Christianity had become a veritable state within a state and would appear to any Roman to be a positive political danger. This circumstance goes a long way toward explaining the outbreak, at the middle of the third century, of the first general persecutions of the Christians.

It is very difficult to say how much the prospect of immediate financial returns to be derived from the confiscation of the property of those who would refuse to conform operated in the motivation of Decius in undertaking his reform action. There are, however, some considerations that will clarify the problem appreciably.

In the first place, there is much satisfactory evidence to show that all of the property of the Christians who were condemned to death, banished, or fled was appropriated by the imperial authorities for the use of the state.⁷ It does not appear that the number

⁶ Paul, *Romans*, XIII. 7. Justin, *I Apol.* 17. Tertullian, *de Idol.* 15, *Scorp.* 14, *Apol.* 42.

⁷ Cyprian, *de Lapsis*, 2, 3, 10-12, 35, *Ep.* XIII. 2 (19), XVIII (24), XIX (25), LIII. 4 (57), LXVIII. 4 (66), *ad Demet.* 12, *de Bono Patientiae*, 12. Eusebius, *H. E.* VII. xi. 18. Arnobius, *adv. Nat.* I. 26.

of those who were condemned to death was large, but the indications are that the exiles were quite numerous.⁸ Considering the general prosperity of the Christians it is quite probable that the financial returns from such acquisitions may have been large. It had been the policy of the Roman government to appropriate all of the property of persons subjected to capital punishment,⁹ but in common practice portions more or less definite and fixed had been allotted to the descendants.¹⁰ In the matter of banishment the attitude of the government had been much more lenient. Thus, unless the charge included something of a treasonable nature which might entail total confiscation,¹¹ the commonly established practice in case of banishment was to confiscate either none at all or only a certain portion, the remainder being left in the hands of the individual himself, or going to his family.¹² In contrast to this, judging from the material that is available and cited above, Decius not only appropriated all of the property of those who were sentenced to capital punishment but also invariably seized all of the property he could discover of those who had fled from persecution or had been banished. We are not, however, justified in concluding from this that Decius made the laws of confiscation much more severe than they had been up to his time, or even that he so applied them. It is to be remembered that the refusal of the Christians to sacrifice to the gods of the Roman state constituted a treasonable act in the eyes of the government and thus laid the recusants liable to the extreme of the law. Furthermore, confiscations on mere pretexts had been increasing apace during the third century, with the definite purpose of replenishing the depleted imperial treasury,¹³ and had been carried on in wholesale fashion by Maximinus.¹⁴ Consequently, Decius hardly would be conscious of any special or extraordinary measure in seizing the entire possessions of any recusant member of the Empire. We do not believe that it can be established that the opportunity for pecuniary acquisitions constituted any appreciable motive in his instigation of persecution, but

⁸ Cyprian, *Ep.* XX. 4 (21), LI. 13 (55), LV. 4 (58).

⁹ *Digest of Justinian*, XXVIII. i. 8:4. Eusebius, *H. E.* VI. ii. 13. Humbert, *Confiscatio*, Daremberg et Saglio, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités*.

¹⁰ *Digest*, XLVIII. xx.

¹¹ Tacitus, *Annals*, III. 1. 6, lxviii. 3, XII. xxii. 2, 3. Humbert, *Exsilium*, *op. cit.*

¹² *Digest*, XLVIII. xix. 38:8, xx. 1, xxii. 1, 4. Tacitus, *Annals*, IV. xxi. 5, xx. 2, 3, III. xxiii. 3, xvii. 8, XV. lxxi. 7. Plinius, *Epist.* IV. 11. Humbert, *Exsilium*, *op. cit.*

¹³ M. Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.* pp. 333-341, 367-369, 395-411.

¹⁴ M. Rostovtzeff, *op. cit.* pp. 398-403.

of course it may be confidently assumed that he would be nothing loath to make use of all such opportunities to refill the empty coffers of the state. He must have been fully aware of the general prosperity of the Christians.

There is another phase in the action of Decius that deserves to be considered in this connection. We have already pointed out that martyrdoms were not numerous during this persecution and this fact has significance in two ways. In the first place, it indicates that Decius was not obsessed with the opportunity that would have been offered for financial gain by the wholesale massacre of those who refused to obey his edict. In the second place, it shows an appreciation on the part of the emperor of the economic loss that would have been incurred by unrestrained executions. It is not unreasonable to impute such understanding to Decius since it is known that others realized the situation.¹⁵ Decius had no desire to suppress Christianity by means of bloodshed and thus further to jeopardize the economic welfare of the Empire through the depletion of its population.

What would have been the outcome for Christianity if the policy of Decius had continued to be effectively administered can never be determined. Its enforcement was cut short by the death of Decius, who lost his life in the late summer of the year 251 while he was attempting to stem the tide of northern invasion. He left the Empire not one whit improved and the disastrous plague which soon after swept throughout the Mediterranean world was but another sign and cause of internal decay.¹⁶ This plague was the occasion for an edict by the new emperor, Gallus, calling upon all the citizens of the Empire to offer sacrifice to the gods in order that the latter might be appeased and the plague checked. This once more brought the Christians under the condemning arm of the imperial government as religious and political objectors. It is worth pointing out that plagues have vital economic significance and in so far as they have such they are to be reckoned as economic forces in the causes of persecution. However, the persecution under Gallus was but momentary and not to be classed as an important action on the part of the Roman government.

The accession of Publius Licinius Valerianus to the headship of the Roman world introduces another significant period in the relation of the Roman government to Christianity. Valerian was a

¹⁵ Tertullian, *Apol.* 44.

¹⁶ Eusebius, *H. E.* VII. 1. Pontius, *Vita Cae. Cyp.* 9. Cyprian, *Ep.* LIII. (57), LIV. 6. (59), LV. 7 (60). LVI. (60), *ad Demet.* 5, 7.

man of the same stamp and attitudes as Decius and the arguments offered concerning the motivation of Decius apply also in the case of Valerian. We refer the reader to that discussion as we feel that the point of view there emphasized is vital to a true understanding of the motivation of these two major persecutions. However, the action of Valerian is a little more difficult to understand because he took no action against the religious recusants of the Empire for some years. We have only conjecture to guide us in this difficulty, but again the economic interpretation comes to our assistance. While Valerian was too busy with external matters concerning the Empire to pay much attention to the internal affairs during the early years of his reign, yet he could have continued the persecuting policy of Decius if he had seen fit. It will be permissible to suggest that Valerian observed that, instead of the condition of the Empire improving after the policy of Decius and Gallus had been put into execution, the situation had continued to grow worse. Possibly he may have decided that the policy was in error and so determined to abandon it. With what result? The economic status of the Empire continued on the downward grade! What was to be done? We must not forget that Valerian, like Decius, would be firmly convinced that the welfare of the Empire was dependent upon the favor of the gods. Perhaps, Valerian may have reasoned, the lack of improvement in the Empire was due not to the policy of Decius but to its ineffectiveness! Possibly a more stringent enforcement would produce results. The outcome was that he issued an edict which differed from that of Decius chiefly in this respect: that it was aimed directly at the Christian organization itself.

How far Valerian may have been influenced by his minister of finance, Macrianus, furnishes an interesting speculation but gets us nowhere. Dionysius attributes almost the entire motivation of the persecution to the influence of Macrianus,¹⁷ but while we can readily understand how Valerian's financial secretary would exert much influence on his state policies, the economic situation must have been much more influential than the failures of Macrianus in the practice of his magical arts.

The confiscations that occurred constitute a further problem in the persecutions of Valerian. In this connection it is important to bear in mind that two edicts were issued by Valerian about a year apart which contain important variations. The first, which

¹⁷ Eusebius, *H. E.* VII. 10.

was issued in the year 257, aimed at crippling the Christian organization by sending the bishops into exile and forbidding all Christian assemblies. No general confiscations or executions were called for. Certainly Valerian, as well as Decius, had no desire to destroy, unnecessarily, large numbers of the population and thus further to endanger the already tottering resources of the Empire; it can hardly be imagined that any Roman emperor would hesitate to shed blood through any feeling of human compassion. But the first edict of Valerian failed signally to bring the desired result. The bishops could direct their flocks almost as well from exile as from their home headquarters, and the Christians continued to assemble for their meetings of worship in spite of the danger resulting from the interdict. The logical consequence was a second edict more drastic than the first. It specified the recall and execution of the bishops along with other members of the clergy; senators and other laymen of high rank were to be degraded, their property seized, and themselves executed later if they persisted as recusants; matrons were to be deprived and banished; the Christian servants in the household and employ of the emperor were to be deprived of their property and sent in chains to work on the imperial estates. The former edict against the assembling of Christians was still in effect and its enforcement was continued. The corporate property and funds of the church were appropriated.

That there is a strong economic element here can easily be perceived but how far it was an active factor in motivating the persecution is quite another matter. M. Allard makes much of the desire of Valerian to seize the wealth of the individual Christians and the corporate property and funds of the church.¹⁸ But if this was an important factor it did not become effective until the second edict. The first edict was not only bloodless but without important confiscations. We feel that this inconsistency in the action of Valerian cannot be allowed. His primary motive, fired, it is important to remember, by the economic crisis of the Empire, was to crush the power of the Christians by destroying their organization. Having failed in his first attempt, he had either to abandon his efforts altogether or to take more stringent measures. He adopted the latter course and sought to disable the recalcitrant body by destroying its material resources and by depriving it of both its clerical and lay leadership. This move showed real acumen but he did

¹⁸ P. Allard: *Les dernières persécutions du troisième siècle*, Paris, 1907, pp. 36-57. *Le christianisme et l'empire romain*, Paris, 1907, pp. 107-110.

not appreciate the inherent power of Christianity. An important part of his policy was to cripple the organization economically, and it can be readily granted that he would not bemoan the increase that might come thereby to the imperial treasury. Many of the Christians were wealthy, as Valerian must have known, and he aimed at the wealthiest.

The Christian community also had considerable property by this time although most of it must not have been readily convertible. In his earlier work¹⁹ M. Allard asserts that an enormous mass of wealth was thus acquired by Valerian for the imperial coffers, but he fails to give us anything but possibilities in substantiation of this claim. In his last work on the persecutions²⁰ he admits that we know "practically nothing" about the extent of these seizures. Hence, any ascription of a definite motive of confiscation to Valerian on this basis is very precarious. In addition, two further items may be adduced in this connection. According to Roman law²¹ the members of a *collegium illicitum* that had been dissolved were to have the privilege of dividing the property, if any, among themselves. This was not allowed by Valerian in connection with Christianity. But this matter can be easily overemphasized. Even if Valerian did intentionally violate common practice he would not be conscience-stricken in the least. He was seeking to destroy Christianity and it would have been quite foolish to have distributed among the members any funds he may have discovered. It is not necessary to assume that he was motivated by any special avarice in order to comprehend the action which he took. The other item is the story of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence.²² This story seems to have considerable foundation and is not inherently improbable, but dependence cannot be placed upon details, and to assert the avariciousness of Valerian on the basis of it is unwarranted. We find ourselves, therefore, in practically the same position with regard to Valerian as we are with regard to Decius: no direct economic motive can be imputed to either of these emperors.

Nevertheless, we wish to reiterate emphatically the interpretation which we have already expounded: that economic factors were fundamental in the instigation of all of these imperial persecutions. While we do not agree with those writers who point to the confiscations of these emperors as indicating their avariciousness,

¹⁹ P. Allard: *Les dernières persécutions du troisième siècle*, Paris, 1907, pp. 93-113.

²⁰ P. Allard: *Ten Lectures on the Martyrs*, London, 1907, p. 99.

²¹ *Digest*, XLVII. xxii. 3.

²² Ambrose, *de Officiis*, I. 42, II. 28. Prudentius, *Peri Stephanon*, III.

we insist that their action can be explained only on the basis of economic considerations. The economic cataclysm which threatened the Roman Empire during the middle of the third century is well known to all students of Roman history. This, and this alone, constitutes the major explanation for the edicts of Decius and Valerian. They both sought, with much anxiety, to avert the impending economic ruin. Apart from this element the first universal persecutions of Christianity remain genuine enigmas. The fact that these emperors adopted religious methods for accomplishing their purpose is satisfactorily explained, as already pointed out, by the superstitious warp and woof of ancient society. The provocation of the first general imperial persecutions of Christianity was economic.

The capture of Valerian by the Persians was followed by the reign of his son Gallienus. The edict of Gallienus relative to the Christians was one of toleration and forms a fitting climax to the evidence we are presenting in favor of an economic interpretation of the imperial actions against Christianity. The content of the edict is preserved for us by Eusebius:²³ the Christians were to be once more allowed to assemble, their corporate property was to be restored, and they were to be protected from molestation. One question only is pertinent for our purpose: Why did Gallienus reverse the edict of his father? No satisfactory answer can be given, especially on the basis of the customary practice of mercilessly maligning the character and intelligence of Gallienus. But, if we accept, even to a limited extent, the defense of the statesmanship of Gallienus urged by M. Homo²⁴ it will help us to understand the action which he took. Valerian, his father, had tried a soft answer but the wrath had not been turned away from the Empire. Then he had tried two measures of repression, the second more drastic than the first, and both had failed. The Christians were still powerful and the Empire was worse off than ever; Valerian himself was enduring an ignominious captivity. Might not Gallienus have observed that, if toleration was useless, repression was worse than useless, for it simply piled up disasters and internal ruptures when the Empire was already at the breaking point? If Gallienus had given the matter no thought why did he take any

²³ Eusebius, *H. E.* VII. 13. How far this rescript of Gallienus was a genuine edict of toleration and what the consequent status of Christianity was is a moot question but that problem is of minor importance in this connection. The vital point is merely that Gallienus took some favorable action with regard to Christianity. More than that is non-essential to the validity of our interpretation.

²⁴ L. Homo, *L'Empereur Gallien*, *Revue Historique*. 113:1-22, 225-267.

action at all? The evidence that he was influenced by his wife is quite unsatisfactory.²⁵ If his attitude had been one of complete indifference he would simply have done nothing and so allowed the former edicts to be carried out or to fall into abeyance wherever they would. Instead, he took definite action in favor of Christianity. Most of this is mere conjecture, of course, but, if guesses are worth anything historically, our guess is that economic factors played their customary rôle.

In suggesting some deductions coming from the imperial actions of the Roman government against Christianity during the middle of the third century it must be borne in mind that no dogmatic assertions are possible. We recognize the fact that there was a fundamental conflict between the Christian society and the Roman state altogether apart from any economic considerations. The two could not continue to exist side by side indefinitely without some mutual understanding. Conflict or coöperation was inevitable. This situation was perceived in a certain measure by Septimius Severus and must have been clearly evident to both Decius and Valerian. Valerian shows his lucid appreciation of the situation by the method he employed to stamp out the obnoxious sect: he struck at an organization and not at masses of the population. But the Roman government never liked to be unpopular in the execution of its laws, and by the middle of the third century action against the Christians was rapidly becoming unpopular. It necessitated great provocation for the Roman government to take repeated and drastic action against the growing and powerfully influential body of Christians; a group who were, on the whole, loyal citizens and good taxpayers. This provocation appeared in the economic crisis of the Empire; something had to be done. On the other hand, if the Empire had continued to prosper as in the days of Augustus or the Antonines, when Christianity was an illicit but "tolerated" religion, would the emperors ever have taken more drastic measures against Christianity than they did during the first two centuries? Although we recognize the fundamental antagonism between Christianity and the Roman state (which might ultimately have caused general persecutions), we may suggest with some confidence that, had the economic crisis of the third century not overtaken the Empire for another two or three generations and Christianity had continued, as it did, to permeate society, it is very doubtful whether even such an emperor as Decius would have at-

²⁵ P. J. Healy, *The Valerian Persecution*, Boston, 1905, p. 271.

tempted, or felt called upon, to suppress so peaceful and powerful a group as the Christians so long as the Empire seemed to be running smoothly. In other words, a *modus vivendi* in all probability would have been established between the church and the state without severe hostilities, even as it already had been established in large measure in the social and intellectual realms and did become an actuality in the political realm in the days of Constantine.

